

Book review: Elizabeth Leane, Reading Popular Physics: Disciplinary Skirmishes and Textual Strategies

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the heading used in this book. In this collection the expertise-as-politics theme is developed only in Turner's 'What is the Problem with Experts?' and in Julia Annas's 'Moral Knowledge as Practical Knowledge', which treats the problem of expertise in the Platonic dialogues. Annas points out that for the ancients, expert knowledge included the virtue of appropriate application with clients in communities. There is a good deal of that sort of expertise still hanging about; certainly expectations of a mix of knowledge and virtue guide one's relations with auto mechanics and dentists, as well as climate scientists and economists.

This is a pioneering volume. I hope that it will be followed by monographs, and articles that will take up the issues presented here, and push them into new contexts. My suspicion is that 'expertise' is too variously used to serve as a single subject of inquiry; but that 'the roles of experts' – effectively the agenda laid out in Turner's essay – is an important focus for the work of philosophers and political theorists. That theme would build from, though not foreground, many of the issues represented here.

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Elizabeth Leane, *Reading Popular Physics: Disciplinary Skirmishes and Textual Strategies* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007). 208pp. ISBN 0 7546 5850 3. US\$99.95, £50.00, DOI

Researchers looking at popular science books seem to be popping up everywhere, stemming from a diverse range of disciplines. These scholars are not just interested in 'pop sci' as a cultural phenomenon, but apply the texts as case studies for a multitude of sociological, philosophical, literary and communication issues. To such a growing motley crew, Elizabeth Leane's *Reading Popular Physics* is a welcome addition to scholarship. As it turns out, it is also a generally engaging book, with several inventive and convincing new takes on the subject.

Leane's chief aim is to apply literary analysis to the study of popular science texts, and her treatment of the more literary aspects of popular

science writing are arguably the most inspiring aspect of the work. Questions of fictional references and devices can be slippery issues for science studies, but Leane shows understanding of much of the current work on the subject and provides some development of thought. She takes Haynes' (1994) typology of the scientist in Western literature, and applies it to the images scientists present of themselves, loosely following Jurdant's (1993) notion of popular science as the 'autobiography' of science. As Leane suggests, Richard Feynman makes for a particularly clear example due to his tendency to mythologise his own history by the repeated telling of anecdotes. Leane argues Feynman constructs a popular image for himself of the 'social naïf'. Behind stories of asking for lemon *and* cream in his tea is an image not only of a comical absent-minded professor, but also of "the boy who saw the emperor's nakedness; one who can debunk unnecessarily or cruel social practises in order to find the efficient, true and (morally) right way ahead" (p.151). This section on the 'characters' of popular science also develops the familiar idea of the scientist as a detective to offer the more specific notion of the Private Investigator. For the Chaos scientists Leane focuses on, she argues the Chandler-style outsider can provide a more suitable metaphor than a 'Holmesian' deductivist (p.148). Arguably, this does not develop analysis of the scientist as a great distance beyond Merton's norms, but I do think it is worth focusing our attention on the way scientist-writers construct themselves in reference to fictional characters, and do so as part of rhetorically building appearances of epistemic capital.

Leane does, however, take a reasonably long time to get to this, as much of the first half of the book seeks to convince the reader that popular science books make for an interesting topic. She provides an overview and history of the field which some may consider useful, but I am not entirely sure what for exactly. As Leane herself emphasises, the popularisation of science is enormous field; and it can be hard to draw meaningful generalisations. There are a host of overlapping definitions and agendas at work here. This is part of what makes it such an interesting area to research, but it also can take space to define and introduce your parameters – space which here might have been better deployed for Leane's personal analysis of specific texts, which I thoroughly enjoyed. My chief problem with the introductory section was that it was

overly concerned with the Science Wars and Snow's 'Two Cultures'. To be fair on Leane, such binaries arguably do persist, and she provides some nuanced critical analysis of them at work. This section might have benefited from a more historical approach, and also from a more substantive application of Gieryn's (e.g. 1999) work on the boundaries of science, especially considering the book's subtitle is 'disciplinary skirmishes'.

Finally, although Leane has read broadly on issues of science in society, literature and sociology, she might also have made more use of media studies. Science communication research can learn much from the study of specific media, such as Leane's literary analysis, but we cannot forget the interconnected nature of contemporary media culture. I would have liked to have seen more reflection on, or references to, popularised science outside of the world of books – Van Dijk's (2006) fascinating discussion of realism in the television version of Brian Green's *Elegant Universe* is an example – which would have made the work interesting to a broader set of scholars.

As I said at the beginning of this review, Leane's book is generally a welcome and interesting

contribution to a growing and exciting field. She concludes with the hope that her book will inspire further research. I am with her on this: popular science books can be rich resource for a range of academic disciplines, and there is much in this book to facilitate this.

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